

Employee Surveys

Taking the Pulse of Worker Satisfaction

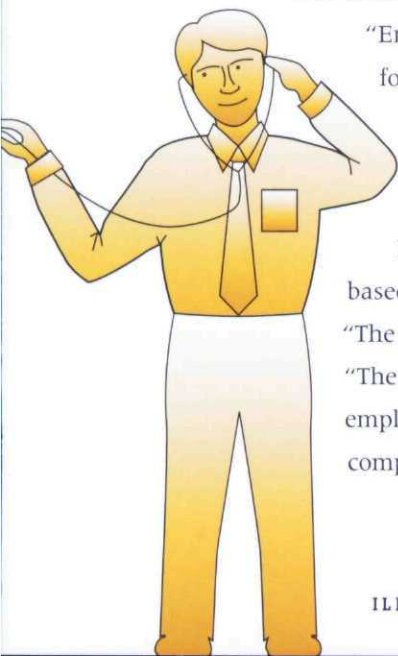
BY RACHEL BROWN

Increased productivity, lower employee turnover, greater customer satisfaction and higher revenues—most companies would agree that these are all worthy business goals, but they may be surprised at the common denominator that produces these results. Numerous studies say the answer is happy employees.

That may seem like common sense, but gauging employee satisfaction is not always an easy task. How do employees feel about their salaries, their benefits, their work environment, their career paths? These are not areas that a manager can tap into readily. To do that well, companies should consider conducting an employee survey—either an in-house version or one developed by outside consultants.

“Employee surveys are an extremely valuable tool,” said Jessica Collison, manager of survey programs for the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM), a trade association in Alexandria, Va. “It allows human resource professionals to tune into the pulse of an organization and find out what employees are thinking. Often companies have no set mechanisms to hear feedback from employees. A survey allows them to voice concerns and frustrations, as well as to give positive comments.”

Donald Payne, Ph.D., research director for Business Research Lab (BRL), an employee survey firm based in Houston, explained that most companies are motivated to conduct a survey following a change. “The change itself can be good, bad or indifferent: an acquisition, layoffs, hirings, a new CEO,” he said. “The second reason [a company may conduct an employee survey] is a lingering concern about how employees feel; a survey is a good way to get a snapshot of what people think. The third reason is that a company has a real problem, such as a high turnover rate.” ▶▶▶



Robert Gray, president of Insightlink Communications, an employee survey firm in Los Angeles, agreed with those reasons, and said his firm structures its surveys around the most common areas of issue—the four C's: commitment (how committed the company is to its employees in terms of providing advancement and training, as well as how committed the employees are to the company); culture (what is the work environment like, how do things stand in terms of office politics); communications (does the company share its goals and future plans with employees; is there an avenue for two-way communication across departments or from lower-rung employees to managers); and compensation (are salaries and benefits deemed appropriate).

Formulating Questions

Survey questions can come in the form of yes/no, multiple choice, fill in the blank and sliding scale, which is a statement or question followed by categories such as Strongly Agree, Agree, Disagree or Strongly Disagree. Both Payne and Gray said multiple-choice and the sliding-scale type questions typically have the highest response rates and offer the most information. For example, Gray said, rather than asking, "Would you like flex time? Yes or No," a better question is, "How often would you use flex time? Frequently, Occasionally, Seldom or Never."

"This type of question gives you a greater degree of interest, and the company can make better decisions and set parameters," he explained. "If 50 percent of the employees say they'd use flex time frequently, then it would make sense to establish it."

A few open-ended, fill-in-the-blank questions are helpful, but Payne said these should be kept to a minimum. "You only want one or two of these because people get tired of filling them out and the response rate drops off significantly after the first question," he said, adding that these questions often tend to be a bit biased as well. "People who have negative views will respond more than those with positive views."

Insightlink's Gray said he wouldn't limit fill-in-the-blank questions because they often add flavor and context to the quantitative analysis. "We included seven open-ended questions in a recent survey and had a good response," he said, but noted that these types of questions can open the door to gripe sessions. "To avoid that, ask employees how they would solve the problem," he suggested.

Examples of good open-ended questions are: "What is the most/least satisfying part of working for

this organization?" and "If you could change one thing about the company, what would it be?" Avoid catch-all questions like, "Do you have anymore comments?"

Laying the Ground Work

To ensure high response rates, the survey experts said it is essential to promote and advertise the survey as much as possible. Write about it in the company newsletter to let employees know a survey is coming, hold meetings or send memos and e-mails to announce the survey, ask senior managers or the president to issue an invitation asking for everyone's response, assure employees of anonymity, have them fill out the surveys at work rather than force them to do it on their own time, promise to share results, and vow to work on any problems that emerge.

"You can't give it too much publicity," Payne said. "Even putting it in the company newsletter on the front page twice isn't enough."

One way to ensure anonymity is to not ask any demographic questions, such as age, gender and position. "This type of information isn't that useful anyway and it saps the whole notion of anonymity," Payne said. "It doesn't take a rocket scientist to figure out who the 23-year-old female accountant is."

Both Payne and Gray agreed that it is not necessary to share all the results, which could be a 50-page report, but it does make sense to let employees see the one- or two-page summary. "If you promise to share the results, employees will be more engaged and encouraged to participate," Gray said.

Paper or Online?

One of the biggest considerations when conducting an employee survey is the format—should it be a paper survey or an online one? Both survey experts agreed that online surveys garner a higher response rate than paper surveys. "Online surveys typically get an 80 percent response rate, while paper gets 65 percent," Gray said.

"In a high-tech company where everyone has a computer and is comfortable using one, an online survey is the only way to go," Payne said, adding that if the company hires an outside firm to do the survey, the e-mailed survey to employees must come from the company and not the survey firm, because many people may automatically delete it, thinking it is spam.

"We get the answers back faster and the data is easily handled," Payne said. "Plus, it's cheaper to do a Web survey because there's no data entry or labor cost." ►►►

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The Do's and Don'ts of Employee Surveys

DO...

- set the right tone: "The wording should be formal but not too academic," said Robert Gray, president of Insightlink Communications. "It should not be funny or irreverent or colloquial, because you want this to be taken seriously, not as a lark."
- keep it simple: "Weed out unnecessary words and avoid rambling on," advised Donald Payne, research director for Business Research Lab.
- be precise and objective: "Don't pre-suppose the answer with questions like, 'This is a great organization to work for,'" Gray said.
- appoint one person as the survey liaison with the consultants: "It's very hard to work with committees on questionnaires," Gray said. "The results are often not good, and it drives up the price because it takes more time."
- post an 800 number on the survey: "If you're using outside consultants, this lets employees call with any questions," Payne said.

DON'T...

- make the survey too long: "A good survey should take 10 to 20 minutes to complete," Gray said, adding that this is typically 40 to 70 sliding-scale questions, with a few open-ended questions. "One hour is too much. Even 30 minutes is stretching it."
- ask ambiguous questions or double-barreled questions: "For example, don't ask things like, 'I think management is diligent and attentive,' because what if an employee thinks that management is diligent but not attentive or vice versa," Payne said.
- ask no-brainer questions: "Don't ask: 'Do you want more recognition for your work?'" Gray said. "Instead, ask things like, 'How often do you get recognized for your work?'"
- avoid asking about problem areas: "It's okay to confirm that something's a problem, even if you don't plan to change it," Gray said. "If the survey finds that the majority of employees are unhappy with the dental plan, the company has a chance to explain that it wants to keep that plan in order to have low co-payments."
- sugarcoat the survey results. "This breeds cynicism and makes employees less likely to participate in future surveys," Payne said.

Gary Hightower, vice president of employee and public relations for *Cameron Communications LLC* (Sulphur, La.), hired a consulting firm to survey the telco's 130 employees in 2001 to gauge attitudes about the company's management change and building renovations. "We did it online, but for people who didn't have a computer, we made sure they had access to one," he said. "We also gave them the option of printing it out and having a paper version."

BRL's Payne said accommodations such as these are a smart move for companies that have many field employees or a large blue collar staff. For companies

that opt to go with paper surveys, he recommended that they block out time and assemble all employees or, for larger companies, break employees down by department, into a large room. If the survey is conducted in this way, "it's not uncommon to get a 90 percent response rate," he said.

Denise Raney, human resources manager for *Telephone Service Co.* (Wapakoneta, Ohio), said her company (as of press time) was gearing up to do an in-house survey of its 62 employees to measure the overall health of the company, particularly since it recently went through a restructuring and last fall expanded from

one building to three.

"We plan to mail the surveys to employees' homes," she said. "They can mail it back or drop it off at the office. We didn't opt for an online survey because we didn't want employees to fear that their answers could be traced back to their computers."

Establishing Deadlines

Employees should be given two weeks to fill out paper surveys. After five days, the company should send out a reminder. "The reminder should say: 'If you filled it in, thanks. If you haven't, please do so. If you've lost it, please call us so we can send you another one,'" BRL's Payne said.

For online surveys, Insightlink's Gray said it's best not to give employees a deadline up front because it will encourage procrastination. "After a week or week and a half, send e-mail reminders to all employees to rally the troops and give them a hard deadline [at that time]," he said. "After two weeks, those who haven't turned them in are unlikely to, regardless of how much more time you give them."

The survey experts pointed out that conducting a survey is not the end in and of itself. "You shouldn't do a survey for the sake of doing it," Gray said. "You should do it to take action. Don't undertake a survey, if you're not willing to address problems."

Payne agreed that companies must take the next step after conducting a survey. "We can identify a problem, but we can't solve it for you," he said of survey consulting firms. "For instance, if the survey results say there's a problem with office politics, the company should hold focus groups and ask employees to give examples of this."

Cameron's Hightower said his company's survey found that mid-level supervisors wanted more training and better communications. "We took these things to heart and got a state grant to beef up our training program," he said. "We also focused on better communication up and down the chain of command. Our departments now have regular meetings to tell employees what is going on, and we use the company newsletter to keep people abreast of new projects."

Raney with Telephone Service Co. said her company already has plans in place to address any problems that surface in the survey. "Once responses are in, we'll ask for volunteers or assign employees to committees to get more feedback on where we can make improvements," she said, adding that the company also will hold focus groups to come up with resolutions.

"Based on responses, we'll announce our priorities and time lines—this will demonstrate to employees that we did hear them and we are listening. If a third

of our staff is discontent in a particular area, we'll move quickly on that issue. If only 10 percent have a problem, that will be a lower priority," she said.

Tallying the Cost

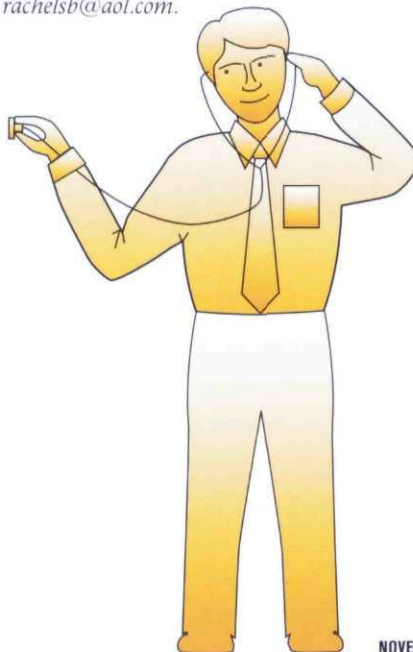
Going the outsourcing route can add up. Insightlink offers three levels of service, each with its own pay scale. "For a do-it-yourself boilerplate employee survey, with no customization, report or analysis, we charge several hundred dollars," Gray said, adding that the price ranges depending on the number of employees. "For a semi-customized survey that comes with a basic quantitative report, we charge \$900 to \$1,200. For a fully customized survey with a full report and recommendations on how to address problems, the price is \$2,500 to \$3,500."

BRL typically charges \$2,500 to \$5,000 for a 100-employee operation, with a turn-around time of four to six weeks, Payne said.

Employee surveys can be helpful for smaller companies as well, the experts noted. "Even companies with 15 to 20 employees can't know what everyone is thinking," Gray said. "Small companies are greatly impacted by management, and there's always an opportunity to learn and improve."

If a company values its employees, then it's important to measure their satisfaction, he added. "Companies often see an employee survey as an expense, but they should view it as an investment. There is real value to a survey because it improves performance." ■

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